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ABSTRACT

In spring 1992, a mid-term assessment of English 10 students was conducted at Golden West College, in California, in order to compare four course placement methods. English 10, "Writing Essentials," is a nontransferrable course which focuses on paragraph writing and grammar review in order to prepare students for entry into English 100. Students enrolled in the spring semester had been referred to the course via the following placement methods: the Stanford Test of Academic Skills (TASK); the College Board Assessment and Placement Services (APS); the English Language Skills Assessment (ELSA); and by teacher recommendation. Half way through the semester, all English 10 instructors were asked to rate their students on a scale of one (i.e., the student appears to have none of the skills necessary for success in the class) to four (i.e., the student appears to have all of the skills necessary for success). In all, ratings were returned for 302 students from 10 sections of English 10, or nearly half of the sections offered. Study findings included the following: (1) 76.5% of the students in the sample were rated by their instructors as having all or most of the skills necessary for success, representing about 23 students in a typical class of 30; (2) 82.1% of the students placed in English 10 by tests were rated as having all or most of the skills required, compared to 61.8% of those placed in the course by instructor recommendation; (3) APS placements had the greatest proportion of successful mid-term ratings (87.6%), followed by TASK (76.7%), and ELSA (60%). Study implications, recommendations, and data tables are provided. (MAB)

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Golden West College
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Mid-Term Assessment of English 10 Students: A Comparison of Methods of Entry Into the Course

Background.

English 10 (Writing Essentials) is a non-transferable, college level course which, according to the GWC catalogue "is designed to qualify the initially unprepared student for entry into English 100, and includes paragraph writing and grammar review". Students enroll in English 10 as a result of successfully completing ESL 005, Advanced English Language II, or other ESL courses with referral by the instructor, or by a placement test recommendation. Some students exercise their legal right disregard a referral or recommendation and enroll in the course.

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the degree of student readiness for English 10, as gauged by a mid-term assessment made by the English 10 instructor. A subsequent report will cover the related issues of additional evidence for the predictive validity of the currently used placement test and methodological issues related to the use of mid-term assessment ratings as criteria for validation studies.

Method.

With the cooperation of the then chairperson of the ESL department, a scale representing the extent to which the "student appeared to have the skills necessary for success" in English 10

was developed early in the Spring 1992 semester (a copy of this appears in the Appendix). The intention was to provide an assessment of the students' skills relative to those judged to be necessary for success in English 10. Thus, the assessment was inherently based upon a broad array of indices representing work over approximately one-half of the semester. Rating scale values ranged from 1 ("the student appears to have none of the skills necessary for success in this class") to 4 (" . . . all of the skills necessary for success . . . "). An option of "?" was available for cases where the instructor lacked sufficient basis or otherwise was unable to evaluate the student with the scale. Additionally, an effort was made to gather information about students who had dropped the course prior to the rating date. Specifically, instructor perceptions of the reason that the student withdrew from the course were indicated using one of the following: "DP+" (student dropped, probably because s/he was placed too high), "DP-" (student dropped, probably because s/he was placed too low), or "DU" (student dropped, for unknown reasons). As such, some information was to be gathered on each student, including those who had dropped.

All instructors of English 10 classes in the Spring 1992 semester were contacted between the 8th and 10th weeks of that semester and were asked to use the scale to provide a mid-term assessment of each student enrolled in the class. After one week, follow-up requests were made of all non-responding

instructors. By the tenth week, ratings were received from eight instructors (comprising ten sections of English 10, or nearly half of the English 10 sections offered that semester). The sample appeared somewhat representative--both day and evening classes taught by both full- and part-time faculty were included. Of course, a possible source of bias may be that ratings were obtained only from those instructors who volunteered to provide them. In all, ratings of 302 students were obtained.

Next, information about students' previous course and placement testing histories was gathered, specifically, the referral or test score immediately preceding enrollment in English 10 this semester. The latest referral/recommendation and its source (referral from ESL or English 9 instructor; specific placement test) were noted for each student in the sample was used, although in many cases students had both test scores and referrals (and often multiple referrals for a series of semesters).

Interestingly, no previous course or placement testing information was found for a small number (23) of students. The most recent information indicated referrals/recommendations to a course other than English 10 in the case of 48 students. It is likely that a significant portion of these students had referrals or test scores that were not "in the system" or that they had informal consent from the instructor to enter the class. In any case, these 48 students were categorized as "Student Choice".

The breakdown of the placement test category is particularly useful in that it makes possible the direct comparison of the placements derived from various tests. Three instruments are represented in the current data. The TASK (Stanford Test of Academic Skills) was used prior to March 1991 for recommending native speaking students to English writing courses; the College Board APS (Assessment and Placement Services, English section) has been used for that purpose since March 1991. The students in this group were tested with the APS for the Spring 1991 semester English. The ELSA (English Language Skills Assessment) is the primary English writing course placement instrument for non-native speakers of English.

Results.

The primary analysis involved evaluating the apparent appropriateness of placement recommendations made by instructors (English 9 or ESL) and those based upon placement tests (ELSA, TASK, or APS). Table 1 presents the frequencies and percentages of the various ratings, by specific method of course entry. Data from Table 1 to be discussed here are also depicted graphically in Figure 1 and Figure 2. A striking finding is that overall, better than three-fourths (76.5%) of students in the sample were rated by their instructors as having all or most of the skills necessary for success in class. Perhaps more meaningful, this

would represent about 23 students from a typical class of 30 students.

As can be seen in Table 1, 82.1% of students who entered English 10 based upon a placement test recommendation were judged as having all or most of the skills necessary for success in the class (4 or 3 ratings). Of the three tests represented in the sample, the College Board APS had the greatest proportion of "3" and "4" ratings (87.6%), followed by the TASK (76.7%) and the ELSA (60.0%). Students entering English 10 based on an instructor referral were rated "3" or "4" in 61.8% of the cases. Within this group, three-fourths (75.0%) of those with referrals from an English 9 instructor and 56.4% of those referred by an English 5 instructor received these positive ratings.

Table 2 summarizes the instructor ratings for the Instructor Referral and Placement Test categories. The combined percentage of "4" and "3" ratings (students rated as having all or most of the skills necessary for success in the class) are 61.8% and 82.1% for the Instructor Referral and Placement Test categories, respectively. Students referred by English 9 instructors received these high ratings at a rate of 75.0% while the rate for those from English 5 was 56.4%. The percentages of these ratings for students recommended to English 10 by the ELSA was 60.0%; the corresponding percentages for the TASK and the for the APS were 76.7% and 87.6%, respectively. Table 2 also contains the

corresponding percentages of "1", "2", or "DP+" ratings for each of these categories.

Discussion.

Overall, placement tests appear to fare well. More than four-fifths of the students recommended to English 10 by a placement test were rated as having all or most of the requisite skills for success in that class. Even more striking is the fact that this rate is nearly 90% for students recommended by the College Board APS test. The superiority of the APS relative to the TASK specifically indicates a gain in the accuracy of placement recommendations attributable to this change in tests. This evidence constitutes additional corroboration of the predictive validity of the APS.

The relatively poorer rate for students placed in English 10 via the ELSA suggests that those students who "top off" on this test for non-native English speakers are relatively less well prepared than those placed via the APS. Current plans are to change the placement test used for non-native speakers of English in early 1993. Indications are that the CELSA (Combined English Language Skills Assessment) will replace the ELSA as the placement instrument for ESL students. The objective format, used in conjunction with a writing sample, should yield more accurate placement recommendations, thereby resulting in a better prepared group of students recommended to English 10.

About two-thirds of the English 10 students in the instructor referral category were rated by the instructors as having all or most of the skills necessary for success in the class. While these percentages are high, they also indicate that noteworthy percentages (25% and 41%) of these students are rated as not having sufficient skills. While there are certainly a variety of reasons for this, perhaps some instructors of the English 9 and ESL 5 courses routinely refer "borderline students" to English 10. Moreover, the difference between ratings of students recommended by the English 9 instructor and those recommended by the ESL 5 instructor indicates particular difficulty with referrals involved in the transition from ESL to English courses, that is, the determination of readiness for "mainstreaming". The data clearly indicate that efforts both to refine the process by which instructor referrals are made and to clarify standards for "mainstreaming" to English 10 should continue. Workshops and discussions targeting these issues, if they include all involved instructors, will certainly lead to an increase in the validity of instructor referrals.

It is difficult to describe these types of percentages in terms of levels of acceptability. For example, is "below 10%" an acceptable rate of the "1", "2", "DP+" (insufficient skills) ratings? Or, perhaps this is unrealistically low and the "acceptable" level is closer to 30% or 40%. What is needed is the establishment of a firm, reliable baseline. If, for example,

this rate runs at 15% for a particular course over a long period of time and then changes dramatically as a function of enhancements in the referral process or placement instruments, then such enhancements can be readily evaluated. However, a single percentage, alone, is not meaningful in any absolute sense. In any case, some discussion of these rates and their implications is needed, and should include instructors and administrators from the involved areas.

Clearly some caution is warranted in interpreting and generalizing these results. Some of the reasons for caution have already been noted. One is that the number of students with an instructor referral is low. Further, while the contents of the "instructor referral" and "placement test" categories are clear, the "student choice" and "no information" categories are rather unclear. There is a need to determine the history of the relatively small number of "no information" students. Some of them may be in classes for whom instructors do not submit referrals. Others may have other valid override information. In any case, this may reflect shortcomings in the process of instructors making referrals and/or the process involved in referrals eventually becoming a part of the permanent record. Similarly, since it is most likely a homogeneous category, interpretation of "student choice" is difficult. It might mean merely that the appropriate (and desired?) course was closed. Certainly, there has been the full range of input from

instructors and counselors in most of these cases. Thus, these students either disregarded or could not follow this advice.

A final issue that should be discussed involves the use of mid-term ratings. The use of mid-term ratings as the "yardstick" against which to evaluate readiness, while receiving more attention, is still not the typical practice in studies of this type. Because of some difficulties inherent with the use of course grades, including differential effects of instruction and instructor variability, mid-term assessments have been suggested as a viable alternative. In light of some shortcomings of the use of course grades, the Matriculation Research Options group has noted that mid-term grades might be a reasonable compromise because "such mid-term grade distributions are less likely to be impacted by course withdrawals than would final grade distributions", and "instructor variation in evaluation procedures will be lessened" (Assessment Validation Project Local Research Options, 1991). In short, the promise of mid-term grades as evaluation criteria for placement validation studies derives from the fact that variables extraneous to the relationship have less of an opportunity to exert an influence thereby allowing for a better assessment of the relationship.

While there is evidence for differences among instructors in their use of the rating scale, such differences would <u>not</u> introduce systematic differences across categories in this study. Such inter-instructor differences would, however, tend to

attenuate correlations of the test score with these ratings (a problem also characteristic of the use of grades as the criterion in validation studies). Nevertheless, the utility of mid-term ratings seems to have been supported by the present data.

Recommendations

1. Instructor referrals should be made in a standardized fashion--both the procedures (consistency of their being made, how they are processed by the college, how they are used) and the criteria used for the making them should be documented, fully understood, and adhered to by all instructors required to make them.
2. Periodic workshops to accomplish "norming" should be conducted. Standards should be understood, agreed upon, and enforced. Instructors should have the opportunity to discuss actual samples of students' writing.
3. To enhance the basis on which to evaluate the utility of mid-term ratings, they should be obtained from <u>all</u> English 10 instructors for at least one semester.
4. While an end-of-term writing sample (mastery test) may be used, instructor referrals should always be based on a wide array of evaluative information about the student. As a rule, the instructor's judgment should take precedence over a single sample.
5. Details of "Student Choice" must be represented on students' permanent records. That is, details of "overrides" and test score information from other schools or agencies should become a part of the students' permanent records. This

would allow separate analyses for subgroups with various reasons for student choice.

6. The question of movement through the ESL course structure is unaddressed. Since it is currently possible for students to be simultaneously enrolled in multiple levels of ESL courses, it is not inconceivable that a single student may receive two or three referrals for different courses. The extent to which this is occurring should be determined and a discussion of its implications should take place.

References

Matriculation Local Research Options Committee (1991, p. 10.3). Assessment Validation Project Local Research Options.

Acknowledgements

I wish to acknowledge the assistance of Richard Ullrich of the Golden West College ESL Department in developing the rating scale and of Carol Cooperman for reading and commenting on an earlier draft of this report.

A P P E N D I X

1. List of placement tests is on page 16
2. The rating scale is on page 17
3. Tables are on pages 18-19
4. Figures are on pages 20-21

List of Tests

APS: College Board. (1984). Assessment and Placement Services for California Community Colleges. Educational Testing Service.

TASK: Gardner, E. F., Callis, R., Merwin, J. C., Rudman, H. C. (1981). Stanford Test of Academic Skills. The Psychological Corporation.

ELSA: Doherty, C. & Ilyin, D. (1980). English Language Skills Assessment. Newbury House Publishers.

RATING SCALE

Indicate your assessment of the appropriateness of this class for each student. Use the following scale for your ratings:

4 = The student appears to have all the skills necessary for success in this class.

3 = The student appears to have most of the skills necessary for success in this class.

2 = The student appears to have few of the skills necessary for success in this class.

1 = The student appears to have none of the skills necessary for success in this class.

? = I am currently unable to make an assessment of this student's skill level.

DP+ = The student is no longer enrolled in the class--the original placement appears to have been too high.

DP- = The student is no longer enrolled in the class--the original placement appears to have been too low.

DPU = The student is no longer enrolled in the class for reasons either unknown or not related placement.

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Table 1

Instructor Midterm Ratings of Students
By Course Entry Method

COURSE ENTRY METHOD \ RATING	4	3	2	1	?	DP+	DP-	[DPU]	Row Total
Instructor Referral (Total)	10 18.2%	24 43.6%	13 23.6%	5 9.1%	1 1.8%	2 3.6%	0 0.0%	3	55
FROM ENG 009	3 18.8%	9 56.3%	2 12.5%	2 12.5%	0 0.0%	0 0.0%	0 0.0%	2	16
FROM ESL 005	7 17.9%	15 38.5%	11 28.2%	3 7.7%	1 2.6%	2 5.1%	0 0.0%	1	39
Placement Test (Total)	50 37.3%	60 44.8%	13 9.7%	2 1.5%	6 4.5%	1 0.7%	2 1.5%	24	134
ELSA	1 6.7%	8 53.3%	4 26.7%	0 0.0%	2 13.3%	0 0.0%	0 0.0%	1	15
TASK	9 30.0%	14 46.7%	2 6.7%	1 3.3%	2 6.7%	1 3.3%	1 3.3%	6	30
APS	40 44.9%	38 42.7%	7 7.9%	1 1.1%	2 2.2%	0 0.0%	1 1.1%	17	89
Student Choice	15 31.3%	19 39.6%	7 14.6%	3 6.3%	3 6.3%	1 2.1%	0 0.0%	4	48
No Information	9 39.1%	12 52.2%	0 0.0%	0 0.0%	1 4.3%	1 4.3%	0 0.0%	11	23
Column Totals	84 32.3%	115 44.2%	33 12.7%	10 3.8%	11 4.2%	5 1.9%	2 0.8%	42	260

Note: Row totals and calcuation of percentages do not include "DPU" ratings. See text for desriptions of the ELSA, TASK, and APS tests.

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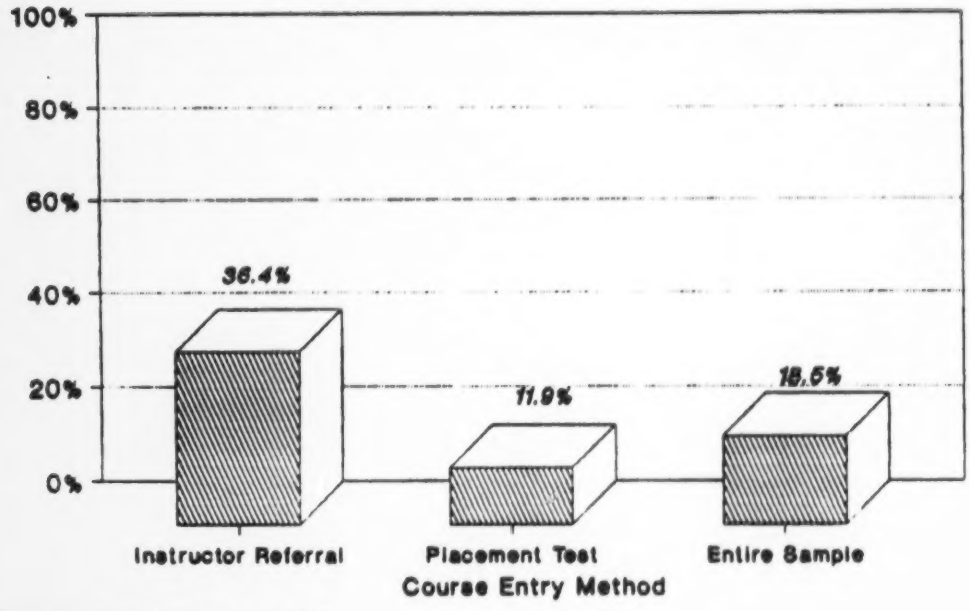
Table 2

Summary of Instructor Mid-Term Ratings of English 10 Students, By Method of Entry Into the Course

Course Entry Method	Rating Category		
	4 or 3	1, 2, or DP+	DP-, ?
Instructor Referral	61.8%	36.4%	1.8%
From English 9	75.0%	25.0%	0.0%
From ESL 5	56.4%	41.0%	2.6%
Placement Test	82.1%	11.9%	6.0%
ELSA	60.0%	26.7%	13.3%
TASK	76.7%	13.3%	10.0%
APS	87.6%	9.0%	3.4%

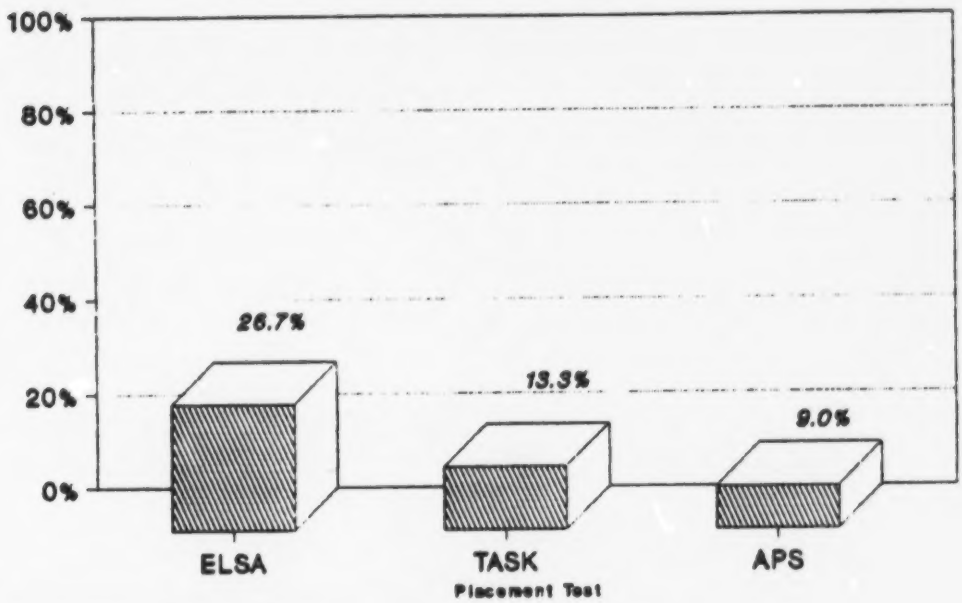
Note: See text for interpretation of ratings and full identification of placement tests.

Students Rated as Lacking Sufficient Skills for Success in English 10, By Method of Course Entry



(Represents ratings of "1", "2", and "DP+")

Students Rated as Lacking Sufficient Skills for Success in English 10, By Placement Test



(Represents ratings of "1", "2", and "DP+")